

THE RELEVANCE OF THE BIBLE IN THE POSTMODERN AGE

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible is one of the most influential and yet most attacked and criticized book in the whole universe. Its claim as a divinely inspired word of God has received massive attacks within and outside the religious circle. Tyrants had burned the Bible and secular scholars have subjected the Bible to a relentless intellectual scrutiny and debates. In spite of this various attacks, the Bible remains indestructible and its life changing ability has proven its divine origin. Sceptics have made countless attempts to refute the divine inspiration of the Bible and its relevance in the postmodern age has been doubted. One of the strongest arguments against the relevance of the Bible in this present age is attributed to its antiquity.

The Bible is certainly of the oldest books written in human history. It was written in the century far removed from ours and its approach to life issues is quite different from ours. There are apparent cultural, historical, sociological, and philosophical gaps that exist between the man in the Bible and the 21st Century man. Consequently, the practices in the Bible are foreign to the postmodern man, hence, the Bible is considered irrelevant to him.

However, Christian scholars and apologists have severally argued for the relevance of the Bible, but the question is, how relevant is the Bible in the postmodern age? Can the Bible proffer solution to the problems of the postmodern man? Does the Bible make any sense to him at all? Is it not contradictory to admit to the antiquity of the Bible and still believe in its relevance in the postmodern age? These are some of the questions this article shall attempt to answer.

POSTMODERNISM AND THE POSTMODERN MAN

What is postmodernism and who is the postmodern man? Answering these questions shall be the starting point to our discussion. Admittedly, it is sometimes difficult to give a straightforward answer to these two questions. Boyne and Rattansi admits that the term “postmodernism” is somewhat controversial since many doubt whether it can ever be dignified by conceptual coherence.¹ For instance, they maintained, “It is difficult to reconcile postmodernist approaches in the fields like art and music to certain postmodern trends in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology.”² However, they added: “It is in some sense unified by a commitment to a set of cultural projects privileging heterogeneity, fragmentation, and difference, as well as a relatively widespread mood in literary theory, philosophy, and social sciences that question the possibility of impartiality, objectivity, or authoritative knowledge”.³ Although the term is sometimes difficult to explain, yet, if we cannot deny the reality of the postmodern ideology in this present dispensation of human history, then we must be ready to explain what the term means.

Logically Postmodernism literally means ‘after modernity’. If postmodernism in its literal sense means after modernity, it is therefore appropriate to ask what modernity is before giving a more constructive definition or definitions to the term “postmodernism”.

Modernity first came into being with the Renaissance. Modernity implies “the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the social world”.⁴ In essence this term emerged in the context of the development of the capitalist state. The fundamental act of modernity is to question the foundations of past knowledge, and Boyne and Rattansi characterize modernity as consisting of two sides: “the progressive union of scientific objectivity and politico-economic rationality...mirrored in disturbed visions of unalleviated existential

despair.”⁵ Having looked into what modernity is, let us return to our discussion: what is postmodernism? Madan Sarup in the book titled, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* refers to Postmodernism as “the incipient or actual dissolution of those social forms associated with modernity.”⁶

Craig A. Localzo has this to say about postmodernism:

The postmodern world exists on multiple understandings of reality, highly skeptical of any objective view of truth. In fact, the notion of absolute truth is seen as an oxymoron in the pluralized epoch of postmodernism. Postmodernists harbor no concept of absolute, universal or objective truth. Matters of truth are relative. It all depends on whom you ask suggests the postmodernist. Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, truth is in the mind of the believer. Truth, rather than being an external reality, becomes merely a belief in the mind of its holder. In matters of religion, philosophy or morals, one system's viewpoint offers as much validity as another; one person's opinion is as sound as another's. To postmodern minds, truth is an internalized construct rather than an external reality.⁷

Postmodernism as a worldview rejects every idea of absolutism and objectivism. It rejects every system that appears rigid and intolerant of other people's worldviews. It tends to promote the doctrine of autonomous self and give man the opportunity to define what is right or wrong to him. To a postmodernist, morality is relative and no ethical code should be enforced on anyone. To this effect, the concept of absolute, universal or objective truth is inconsequential and must be blatantly rejected.

One of the major quests of the postmodernists is to promote moral independence and to give man the sovereign charge over his own life. This in turn has created a climate of moral and ethical anarchy, and except we want to pretend, we will all agree that such an insidious attempt to acquit

man from his moral accountability to God is socially inconvenient and has led to several defiant behaviours which had tainted the moral sanctity of our human society. Postmodern initiative for plurality, diversity and tolerance is quite appreciated but it is a threat to social stability and security. In a stricter sense, it has reduced the level of ethical, religious, and even marital commitment in our contemporary society, and the consciousness of a divine arbiter which once guided our relationships with our fellow human being has been trampled underfoot. Localzo states: "... the postmodern world remains open to multifarious understandings of reality, highly skeptical of any objectified truth. In fact, the notion of absolute truth becomes oxymoronic in the pluralized epoch of postmodernism. Matters of truth are relative. It all depends on whom you ask, suggests the postmodernist".⁸ Localzo also add: "Another defining characteristic of postmodernism is the proliferation of choices and options in every realm of life...Postmodernists view this abundance of choices as needed and liberating. Plurality of interests demands plurality of choices – an expectation that ultimately colors the society's mindset when it comes to matters of religious preference".⁹

What about the postmodern man? Who is the postmodern man? What is his line of reasoning? How did he see the world in which he lives in? These are interesting questions that calls for sincere answers. The postmodern man is not an alien or an extraterrestrial being; he is simple the man who have consciously or subconsciously accepted the entire tenets of postmodernism and practices the same. He sees life from the postmodern perspective; he is mentally, psychologically, socially, ethically, and perhaps religiously affected and influenced by the postmodern beliefs.

The postmodern man sees his cultural environment as the key determinant of his moral choices. Truth to him is both relative and subjective. He defines truth by his perception of reality; hence,

absolute truth is anachronistic to him. Furthermore, the postmodern man will not subject himself to any organized code of religious or philosophical ethics that are not convenient to him. Sin and immorality are mere ecclesiastical vocabularies introduced to religious minds to make them avoid any practice which appears to threaten their religious heritage. Both morality and immortality are relative to him; he determines what is wrong or right for him. His ethical code is situational rather than being absolute. The postmodern man regards the Ten Commandments as a rule of thumb for human convenience rather than divine insistence. He reads the Ten Commandments as follows: “Thou shall not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain *ordinarily*. Thou shall not commit adultery *ordinarily*.”¹⁰ He rejects the orthodox acceptance of the Bible as the only inspired word of God which has the final authority in all doctrinal and ethical matters. Like Rudolf Buttmann, the postmodern man queries and doubts all the supernatural events in the Bible and calls for the demythologization of such supernatural accounts in the Bible. On the final note, the postmodern man prefers to be an independent thinker, not boxed in by any set of moral standards passed on by the sages and laid down as standard norms for the human society.

The Characteristics of Postmodernism

It is important to mention at this point that the beliefs and practices of postmodernism are personal rather than been identifiable with any special interest group. Therefore, some of the characteristics that shall be listed below are not supposed to be exclusive, although they are fundamental to postmodernists.

1. **The claim for absolute truth is illusory:** Postmodernism rejects every notion of absolute truth. This claim for none absolute truth has been supported by popular personnel in the field of

secular and even religious history and philosophy. In a milder sense, postmodernists believe that to accept the absolute is to deny oneself of the right to decide what is good and acceptable to him. According to Bunn's law, "All truth is relative to the perception of the individual."¹¹ This is the position of postmodernism. "Truth claims, says postmodernists, are merely tools to power". Rather than dominating others with our "version of reality", postmodernists call us to accept all beliefs as equally valid. Instead of one truth, we have many truths.¹² They maintain that absolute truth does not exist; objective truth does not exist. In other words, everyone has the right to choose what is true to him. This assertion expresses itself in such statement as this: "For me there is nothing wrong to have an abortion, but for someone else it might be wrong. It's all relative." Therefore, postmodernists consider absolute truth to be illusory.

2. Traditional authority is false and corrupt: Postmodernists speak out against the constraints of religious morals and secular authority. They wage an intellectual revolution to voice their concerns about traditional establishment.¹³ Openness without the restraint of reason along with tolerance without moral appraisal are postmodern mandates.¹⁴ Postmodernism makes man an authority in himself; his right to act or make decisions at any given time should not be determined by any religious code of ethics, but by his perception of reality.

3. Morality is relative: "Nothing is absolute, and nothing is forever", say the postmodernists. Therefore, postmodernists clamour for "moral relativism". They believe that the concept of moral absolute is not only absurd, but also dangerous and morality should be determined within the cultural context of an interest group. The argument for moral relativism can be summarized in three propositions:

- What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so that there are no universal moral standards held by all societies.

- Whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he or she belongs.

- Therefore, there are no absolute or objective moral standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times.¹⁵

4. **All religions are valid:** Valuing inclusive faiths, postmodernists gravitate towards New Age religion. They denounce the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as being the only way to God.¹⁶ Postmodernists call us to accept all religious beliefs as equally valid. Since all religious beliefs are equally valid, postmodernists call for the tolerance of other systems of faith. They maintained that no religion should claim superiority over the other. To the postmodernists, the Christian faith is as valid as others in the world. They believe that accommodating other religious beliefs and will put an end to religious wars. Postmodernism supports religious syncretism, inclusivism, pluralism and universalism. The following statements summarize their presupposition:

- All religions eventually lead to salvation
- The Bible is not the sole word of God
- There is a possibility of salvation to all without Christ
- There is a dimension of truth in every religion.

The Contradictions of Postmodernism

Postmodern thinking is full of contradictions and absurdities. Like the word of Felix Guattari, postmodernism lacks content.¹⁷ However, this is not to say there is no sense whatsoever in the postmodern claims. There are several interesting insights one can gain from the postmodern ideology. They include:

1. The importance of language and worldviews
2. The importance of listening
3. The importance of respecting the order and the margins of society
4. The importance of honouring diversity
5. The importance of decentralization
6. Honouring creativity in a way that modernity might not.¹⁸

In spite of these advantages, postmodern thinking is self-contradictory and inconsistent in its own claims. The first point to its contradiction is found in its rejection of objective and absolute truth. We cannot possibly live in the world devoid of objective truth; living in such a world will lead us to social and ethical anarchy and by implication, no one is safe in such a world. The elimination of absolutes will inevitably lead to social and ethical confusion. Truth is discovered or revealed; it cannot be invented by an individual. No one has *right* to his *own* truth. For instance, we all need air to breath and food to sustain us. This is an absolute statement of truth, and no postmodernist can contest that. So if a postmodernist claim that there is nothing absolute and then he believes in that absolute statement that everyone needs air to breath and food to sustain him, then he has contradicted himself. Another example for an absolute statement of truth is that one cannot be dead and be alive at the same time. Again, no sane postmodernist will disagree with that. One must be true out of the two. It does not matter whether he believes it or not; absolute truth exist. There are standards we all use each and every day in mathematics and

science. The examples of such standards are found in several laws that govern the natural world like the law of gravity, law of motion, law of aerodynamics, and so forth. If all truth is relative, why would a postmodernist add 2+2 together and expect 4 as his answer? Another point of contradiction in postmodernism is the claim that morality is relative. For example, no postmodernist will say it is good to kill an innocent person for no reason. We all universally agree that killing somebody for no reason is absolutely evil. If the postmodernist have a contrary opinion to that, then he should be ready to be the next victim of such an act. Some people are not willing to oppose great moral horrors like human sacrifice, genocide, slavery, bestiality, etc. because they think no one has the right to criticize the moral views of another group or culture. Moral relativism contributes to deviant behaviours in the society. For example, Francis Crick, the Nobel prize-winning biologist, has advocated legislation mandating that newborn babies would not be considered legally alive until they were two days old and had been certified as healthy by medical examiners.¹⁹ Winston L. Duke, a nuclear physicist, stated that reason should define a human being as life that demonstrates self-awareness, volition, and rationality. Since some people do not manifest the qualities, some are not human.²⁰ With Duke's assertion, killing can be justified as not morally wrong if the committer cannot perceive any quality of self-awareness, volition, and rationality in the person killed. He has not killed a human being; he has only eliminated what he *perceived* might disturb his convenience. We all need to come to term with the truth that moral absolutes must never be ruled out if our stay on earth must be safe and peaceful. The adverse effect of moral relativism is to create a world full of moral decadence and all sort of inhumane practices.

BIBLE AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE POSTMODERN AGE

As we are about to bring this discussion to its conclusion, it is important that we ask if the Bible is relevant in this postmodern age. The Bible claims divine inspiration but this claim has been questioned by great minds from past centuries even to this present time. The subject of biblical inspiration is crucial to the question of whether the Bible is relevant in the postmodern age.

The matter of biblical inspiration has been a subject of debate for centuries and not everyone has come to term with its inspiration. Part of the arguments against the divine inspiration of the Bible is attributed to the apparent variance and contradictions found in some of its pages, but theologians and apologists had insisted that none of those variances can discredit the Bible's claim of its own inspiration. However, before we can rightly answer whether the Bible is relevant in the postmodern age or not, we need to make a case for its inspiration.

A Case for the Inspiration of the Bible

Who do we mean by the inspiration of the Bible? Is it the same inspiration Shakespeare claimed for writing his literature or the kind Beethoven claimed for his musical compositions? In his book titled *Know Why You Believe*, Paul Little explains inspiration like this: "The Bible is not inspired as we say the writings of Shakespeare were inspired or the music of Bach was inspired. The biblical sense of inspiration means: *God so superintended the writers of Scripture that they wrote what He wanted them to write, disclosing the exact truth He wanted conveyed.*"²¹ The word inspiration as used in 2 Tim. 3:16 literally means "God-breathed" or given by the inspiration of God. Prof. Danny McCain has this to say about inspiration: "The idea is that God was so close to the writers of the Bible that the transfer of thoughts and ideas was like breathing."²² The theory of inspiration has raised several arguments within theologians and philosophers. So accepts the orthodox view of biblical inspiration which insists that the Bible is absolutely the

word of God, while others are in support of the liberal position which maintains that the Bible contains the word of God. These arguments have lingered for decades, but what does the Bible teach about its own inspiration?

1. It teaches that inspiration is verbal: Verbal inspiration indicates that inspiration extends to the words of the Bible themselves, not only to the ideas. God did not give the words of the Bible by the way of dictation, but guided and superintended the writers to write only the truths He wanted to convey within the framework of the writers' personalities.
2. It teaches that inspiration is plenary: This means that every part of the Scripture is inspired, not merely some parts of it. Therefore, the implication of that is, one cannot have the right to believe some parts and disbelieve the other parts.
3. It teaches that inspiration gives authority: By this we mean the Bible has the final authority for everyone in all ethical and doctrinal matters. James P. Eckman writes: "To God ethics is not a set of fluid standard. It is a set of absolutes that reflects His character and defines human duty...He, the Creator, sets the standard against which we must measure all behaviour."²³ Therefore, since God has set the standard against which we must measure all behaviours and the standard is revealed in the Bible, the Bible therefore becomes the final authority in all ethical and doctrinal matters.

Modern theories about inspiration

1. **Classical Liberal Position:** This view may be summarized in the expression: "*The Bible contains the Word of God.*" Liberal theologians sometimes admit that the Bible does contain some words of God along with a whole host of words of men.²⁴

2. **Neo Orthodox Position:** This position holds that the Bible becomes the word of God. These men believe that the Bible contains some errors and inconsistencies. However, they believe that God could still make use of this imperfect tool to speak to us. According to this position, the Bible becomes the word of God to an individual when it addresses and meets the need of the individual. The proponents of this view include Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.

3. **Partial Inspiration View:** This position maintains that only portions of the Bible are inspired. The parts of the Bible that deal with theological issues are inspired and inerrant.²⁵

4. **Orthodox View:** This is the author's view. We believe that God so overshadowed and superintended the writers of the Bible, that though they used their own vocabulary and style in the actual construction of the sentences...they were protected from writing error and the final product was stamped by God's authority as Absolute Truth, the Word of God.²⁶

The internal and external evidences for the inspiration of the Bible

There may be no proofs scientifically that the Bible is inspired of God, but the Bible itself is permeated with things that prove its inspiration and authenticity. There are internal and external evidences for the inspiration of the Bible. The internal evidences for the inspiration of the Bible are as follows:

1. The evidence of self-vindicating authority
2. Evidence of the testimony of the Holy Spirit
3. Evidence from the transforming ability of the Bible
4. Evidence of the unity of the Bible

The above evidences are internal and subjective. Let us quickly look at the external evidences of the divine inspiration of the Bible. These evidences are enormous but only few will be mentioned here. They are:

1. Evidence from the historicity of the Bible
2. Evidence from the indestructibility of the Bible
3. Evidence from its popularity
4. Evidence from fulfilled prophecies
5. Evidence from the integrity of its human authors.

A Case for the Relevance of the Bible in the Postmodern Age

There is no book written in the history of humanity that speaks so clearly of the origin, purpose and the destiny of man like the Bible. As knowledge increases man becomes more and more confused and uncertain of his life and his future, and every human attempt to solve this problem of uncertainty about the future and man's ultimate destiny has always ended in futility. There is a vacuum in every man that science and philosophy has been unable to fill. Insurance organizations promise the future hope they cannot give, government promises security and peace in the society but all their attempts had failed to calm the raging storm of fear and despondency that has taken over the minds of men. What is my purpose here on earth? How can I know my origin? What is responsibility for sufferings and evils in the world? Is there any assurance that this shall come to an end someday? How can I make my relationship with my family and neighbours work? If this world has a beginning, what will be its end? When I die what shall be my lot? How can I have the peace of mind in this mixed-up, crazy world? These are myriads of questions in the minds of men that only the Bible could answer.

The Bible classifies every man into two categories namely: the lost and the redeemed. Every man before the first advent of Jesus suffered depravity. In effect, every man whether great or small, poor or rich, educated or illiterate, whosoever we are, we were utterly lost, depraved, totally estranged from our maker, and unable to save ourselves. This was caused by the sinful nature we inherited from Adam, and the consequences that followed the disobedience of our forefather – Adam – has rendered man helpless, hopeless, alienated from God, and spiritually destitute. Since his fall, human nature has been debased and he stands before God an object of His wrath. The fall affected his perspective to life, his understanding of himself, he lost his true sense of identity, his emotion was badly affected, his conscience became corrupt, and no one was fit to help him but his Maker. Sin left man in the state of hopelessness, confusion, and separation from God. This is how the lost is described in the Bible. He is actually in battle with the devil who is ready to completely ruin him, and on the other side, he is not at peace with his Creator.

However, for the redeemed, reverse is the case. They had found hope, the estrangement has been healed, their depraved minds had been transformed and renewed, and finally they had found peace with their Maker through the redemptive work of Christ. Nevertheless, the lost and the redeemed would not have known their spiritual conditions save the Bible. The Bible makes it clear how the lost can find their ways to God. The Bible reveals how our pasts have been dealt and the future God has prepared for us. Someone once said, “I know my future; for it is written in the Bible.”

The Bible is relevant because it is the book of hope. It is the only book that tells man about his origin, his purpose on earth, and his destiny. It teaches moral lessons that can help us in our day to day relationship with other men. It teaches how we can have the peace of mind that the government and every secular system could not provide. Although the book is an ancient book but its truth is

eternal. It is filled with teaches on our day to day lives like marriage, friendship, relationship with others, wedding and funeral, etc. Its principles are applicable to the rich and the poor, the learned and the illiterate, the upper-class and the lower, the young and the old. One basic example of its relevance can be seen in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments can be divided into two parts. The first five talks about man's relationship with God and the other five speaks about man's relationship other human beings. No sane postmodernist will say it is wrong to honour ones parents or there is nothing wrong with stealing, coveting what belongs to ones neighbours or bearing false witness against ones neighbours. Therefore, the Bible is relevant to every age.

Conclusion

The Bible does not beg for acceptance but instructs us to accept God's revelation of Himself through the Bible. The Bible is not merely a religious book but God's own Word given to us to guide us in our daily living. It is profitable for teaching, rebuke, corrections and instruction in righteousness. The world cannot judge the Bible; rather, God shall judge the world through the Bible.

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